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ABSTRACT

Reading and writing plays can be a good way to learn reading, listening, and writing skills. This paper contains suggestions for using plays in adult literacy courses. Ideas are given for reading and writing plays, including developing a plot and characters, drafting a script, and editing and finalizing a script. Various methods of transcribing the play (tape recorder, overhead projector transparency, scribe) are suggested; advantages and disadvantages are discussed. (KC)

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What about a Play?

Working with plays, whether that means reading a play as a group, or creating your own play, can be enormous fun. However, many people find it daunting.

In this article Rosey Eggar gives a variety of ideas on how to enjoy reading and writing plays. Rosey is an organiser at Cambridge House Literacy Scheme, South London. Last year, she was a member of the group planning and running the ALBSU Materials Workshop Conferences.

Introduction

The title may be enough to put you off. So let me quickly say what this article is about. It is about reading and writing plays. It is not play-acting. It is not drama. Working with plays can be a very enjoyable way to develop reading, writing and listening skills.

In 1985/86 ALBSU held three national conferences entitled Materials Workshops. One of the option groups was called 'What About A Play?'. Over the three weekends a lot of ideas and experiences were shared in these sessions. I have included quite a lot of the material in this article. I hope this is the appropriate time to acknowledge participants' contributions which I have included here.

The workshops were a chance to gather together some ideas that could be adapted to suit any situation. I hope this article will work in the same way.

The general format of the workshop session included reading plays; developing a plot and characters within small groups; and writing a script. At each stage we reflected on our own experience and discussed how we might best use this with students. Nearly everyone went away from the workshops planning to do some work on plays with their groups. If this actually happened, there could be a growing number of plays around England and Wales waiting to be shared with other local schemes. If not, then read on and get started!

Play Reading

Plays to Read

A great many people come across the Spirals series of plays (Fig 1). These are clearly laid out and none of the speeches are very long. The storylines are humorous and entertaining. The plays are written for a varying number of characters. The advantage of a play for two parts is that it can be read by a one-to-one pair; a play for eight parts can be used with a group.

It might be possible to obtain scripts from the radio or television companies. A first step would be for students to write letters to the companies asking about the availability of play-scripts. If they can be obtained, they can be used to follow up the programme or extracts can be read in the group.

Some television and stage play scripts are sold in the bookshops. We have found 'Boys from the Blackstuff' very popular. Others like 'Hancock' are worth considering. When reading a television script, the students may already be familiar with the characters and the story. This can help some people in reading the play. It might be better to take an extract rather than the whole play and remove the detailed stage instructions. In order to choose suitable extracts you need to be familiar with the text.

The Operation

3 Parts: *Doctor, Nurse, Patient.*

Doctor Wheel him in, nurse.

Nurse There we are, sir.

Doctor Ah, good afternoon, Smith.

Patient Jones, doctor.

Doctor Jones?

Nurse Yes, it's Mr Jones, doctor.

Doctor I thought Smith was coming in first.

Nurse No, this is Jones.

Doctor Oh, I was expecting Smith.

Nurse Well, it says Jones.

Patient I'm Jones.

Doctor All right, my good man.

Nurse It says Jones on the name tab, doctor.

Doctor But I've got the notes for Smith.

Patient Look, I'm Jones!

Fig. 1: Extract from 'Tell Me Where it Hurts', Spirals Series. Published by Hutchinson

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A growing number of plays are now being produced by literacy groups and before long more of these should be published. At Cambridge House Literacy Scheme we published 'The Railway Carriage' which is now out of print, but I mention it because we worked with a graphic designer who used a variety of typefaces to distinguish each character's part (Fig 2). At present we are in the process of publishing a new book containing several plays written by groups in the Scheme (Fig 3).

PETER **Well, yeah, Discount, discount.**

ERIC *That's what I like to see. A good businessman. That's the only way to succeed in this world – to be go-ahead and forthright. That's what I say.*

PETER **Mmmmmm.**

ERIC *How did you start off in your own business then? Did you work for some-one else first?*

PETER **Yeah, yeah, I used to work for this fella and he's showed me the ropes as they say.**

ERIC *Ha, ha. Ropes. That's ropes for lowering them into graves I suppose. What did he show you after that?*

PETER **The boxes . . He said it ain't a dead-end job.**

ERIC *What made you decide to branch out on your own?*

PETER **I suppose it was the wood.**

ERIC *Ha, ha, ha.! The wood . . .*

Fig. 2: Extract from "The Railway Carriage" Published by Cambridge House Literacy Scheme.

The Disappearing Horse (extract)

Cast list
Carrington
Rod Stewart
Columbo
Magnum
Sue Ellen

Scene 1: Telephone conversation

Carrington: Hello, is Mr. Stewart there, please?

Rod Stewart: Hello. Yes, this is Rod Stewart. Who's that calling?

Carrington: That's you, Rod, is it?

Rod Stewart: Yes, how are you doing?

Carrington: This is Blake. When can I come over and look at my new racehorse, the Cambridge Flyer?

Rod Stewart: Sometime today, if you want.

Carrington: Say about 2 o'clock?

Rod Stewart: Yes, that suits me fine.

Carrington: Okay. I'll see you about 2 o'clock.

Fig. 3: The script was written at a Cambridge House Literacy Scheme writing weekend. The idea came from the students. A tape recorder was used.

Reading a Play

In introducing a play reading session to students you will need to make sure that you are familiar with the play. This knowledge will help you to ensure that when students take on parts they will get extra support where necessary.

For students who have never read a play before, some thought will have to be given to help people understand the usual format and presentation. The kinds of conventions that have to be observed include not reading the name of the character; allowing the other person to finish; having a narrator to read the directions.

You could decide to use colour coding to help with the reading of each part. Each character can be designated a different colour using a highlighter. When a part is being read, it is easier to see quickly whose part it is and the colour helps indicate that the name is not to be read. Sometimes stage directions are included. The group could choose to have a narrator to read them, or decide to leave them out.

Most plays can be read by students with different reading levels. The group offers support and the more beginning readers can work with a tutor or another student. If the play is popular, it might be read again with different people taking the parts. Readers can draw on their memory of the story to work out hard bits. Familiarity with the script can give confidence. Some hard words could be worked on before reading the script.

Play-reading can help listening skills as well as those of reading. Each person has to follow the script to know where they are and know when they are to speak. Initially, each person may be so involved in reading an individual part that they are not fully aware of how the characters relate to each other. After a while, the student becomes aware of the dual roles of reader and listener and will be actively listening to the whole play.

To ensure that reading a play is going to work well in your group, there are some points to bear in mind. Will the readers be able to relate to the subject matter in some way? It does not have to be based on people's own lives but the plot should be familiar either through personal experience or through the media or oral traditions.

Are the lengths of speeches short? Can most students at whatever their reading level deal with the reading either by themselves or with their support? I have been surprised more than once by the skills students use to keep the play going. It might be mutual support or with one whispering into the ear of the reader or, on the second reading, using memory recall. If one part seems to do a lot of speaking, it might be useful to see if it can be sub-divided, possibly by scene.

In deciding who takes which part you will need to remember that it can be frightening to read in front of others. On the other hand, it can bring a feeling of rejection for those not taking part. It might be helpful to talk about the roles of reader and listener and ensure that each person has some experience in each role.

Once the first play has been read, there is always enthusiasm to read more. Spirals are an excellent introduction to reading plays. Favourites soon emerge. Then someone may suggest writing a play in the group.

Writing a Play

A script does not just appear. There are several stages to be worked through:

1. Developing a plot and characters
2. Drafting a script
3. Editing
4. Finalising a script

Developing the plot and characters

Often the plot and characters depend on each other and can be developed alongside each other. The first few times it might be easier to work from something known and from the group's own experience.

In the workshops at the conferences, the participants in each session had a slightly different task. They were asked to write a play based on:

1. Free choice
2. A given situation
3. Characters with a given name and age

1. Free choice

Admittedly the time was short but most of the groups quickly developed a plot and characters. They mostly drew on personal experiences of one member of the group. The resulting scenarios included a complaint about the hotel room made by one of the participants to the hotel staff (Fig 4), a conversation based on a misunderstanding between a literacy student and a person waiting for a job interview and a literacy worker trying to get to the right meeting in the Town Hall.

At the Hotel (extract)

Scene 1: Telephone conversation in hotel bedroom

Uriah Pompous: Reception, can I help you?

Madame Guest: Excuse me, but there is a dreadful noise coming from my bathroom.

Uriah Pompous: What room are you in, Madam?

Madame Guest: Room 360.

Uriah Pompous: Is it alright if I come and have a look, Madam?

Madame Guest: A listen, you mean.

Uriah Pompous: Quite so, madam.

Scene 2: At Reception

Mrs. Sweeney: What's up?

Uriah Pompous: Another moaning guest. They think we're here for their convenience. You'd better come up with me, Mrs. Sweeney. You can't trust these women guests.

Mrs. Sweeney: Okay. You think she might be a difficult one then?

Uriah Pompous: You can't be too careful in my position.

Mrs. Sweeney: That's right. They're funny people - guests, especially women on their own.

Fig. 4: A Script, written by a scribe, based on personal experience.

2. A given situation

Each group selected from a set of cards that offered:

in the back garden

on the bus

at the Post Office

after a car accident

at the library

at the Job Centre

at the supermarket

The group had to develop their own characters and plot from this given information. People were encouraged to write the play for the other groups in the workshop. For this reason the groups often tried to sort out a punch line first and then develop the story. This is not so likely to happen in a group of students and a lot of discussion will be needed to develop a clear story line that is not too complicated to tell.

3. Given characters

Each member of the group selected a card giving a name and the age of a character. The group had to find a story that would involve all these characters. Some of the names could be used for a man or a woman, e.g. Chris. The mix of ages also made a lot of calls on the imagination to sort out an appropriate story line (Fig 5). This was quite a hard task and a lot of discussion and negotiation were needed to agree a plot. Some groups added characters in non-speaking parts to help the action.

In the Red!

Bank Manager's Office: Audrey is visiting Peter at his request. They are old friends.

Peter: Hello, Audrey, do come in.

Audrey: Hello, Peter, how are you? How's the family? I haven't seen your mother for ages.

Peter: (Looks at his watch) We're alright, but I think you're the one in trouble!

Audrey: (Looks surprised) Trouble! Me! How can I be in trouble? At my age!

Peter: Well, it's money troubles, Audrey.

Audrey: How can I have money troubles when I haven't got any money?

Peter: That's just the point - I agree you haven't any! So you can't go writing cheques for thousands of pounds.

Audrey: But I've got to write cheques to pay the bills. You said it was easier to pay by cheque and you gave me the book!

Peter: Yes, but you can't write cheques for thousands!!

Audrey: But I haven't. I've only paid the 'phone bill.

Peter: You must have been talking for hours to long distance friends! Running up a bill for £3,000!

Audrey: Three thousand pounds! No, it can't be! I thought it was thirty pounds.

Peter: Well, yes it was, but you put the dot in the wrong place and made it £3,000! You must be more careful in future!

Fig. 5: A Script, based on two given characters (Audrey, 54 years old and Peter, 35 years old), and written on an overhead transparency.

Improvisation

Once the plot and characters had taken shape, groups were encouraged to improvise some dialogue to see if any alterations were needed. Some groups found this task very hard. In literacy groups, this is one of the easier activities for students.

The characters can be based on people known to the group in everyday life, through television soap operas (Fig 3). It is much easier to work from known characters as the group are aware of the types of things the person might say. Make sure that everyone distinguishes between the character and the person taking the part.

By improvising, people building a dialogue without a script, changes can be made by the group and guidance can be given about what needs to be said and what can be left out. It might be decided that a narrator would be a useful character to include. Sometimes it is helpful to work out a beginning, a middle and an end. This is a useful guide to the characters to know what needs to be said at each stage. The group will have to be selective about what gets included. A play can grow and grow if you are not careful. The group must have control of the situation and discussions need to be held regularly about what is happening and where you are going. The group need to review both the plot and characters continually to make sure they fit together. If problems arise they need to be explored by the play-writing group and resolved by them.

The larger the group the more time required for negotiation. It is also likely that some of the group will do all the talking and others will remain quiet. The tutor's role is to ensure that everyone is as involved as they want to be.

When improvising, words can be changed and speeches can be of any length. When it comes to agreeing a script, other things have to be taken into account. These might include the way the script is to be written; the audience; and the length of time available.

Writing a Play

Three choices were offered at the Materials Workshops:

1. Tape recorder
2. Overhead projector transparency
3. Scribe

Each group used one of the above and then commented on how they had felt about using that method.

1. Tape recorder

It is always important that the group are comfortable with the taping equipment. They know how it works and have heard their voices on tape. It is also worth checking that there is not a lot of extraneous noise being included. At one workshop session, the tape picked up the talking from the other groups.

Given the freedom from writing, the groups created a script with a natural speech pattern. None of the groups were able to reach the editing stage. 'The Library' script (Fig 6) tape has been transcribed straight from the tape. It has not been edited by the group. I have added the words in brackets for clarification.

The groups commented on how the tape recorder made it easier to go over the words that had been recorded and alter bits where needed.

The following points need to be born in mind by whoever is going to transcribe the tape:

- You need to know who is who.
- It is helpful to have been involved with the group in order to clarify inaudible parts.
- The longer the tape is the more time required for transcribing.

The Library

Librarian, Mr. Watt, Mrs Foulkes-Smythe

Librarian: Have you got your ticket, Mr. Watt?

Mr. Watt: I've just got it. It's somewhere in my pocket.

Mrs. F-S: Do you really know what's in that book, Mr. Watt?

Mr. Watt: It's a gardening book.

Mrs. F-S: It isn't about gardening, you know.

Mr. Watt: But there's a . . .

Mrs. F-S: Don't go by the cover. I've had it. It's obscene. In the section about earwigs, for example, there's a description about their . . . their act! I have been married 33 years and I've never come across such filth (She turns to the Librarian) You should know better than have such books in the library. No wonder there are so many rapists and perverts about. I sit on the Bench and I see it every week.

Mr. Watt: I'm not one of those perverts.

Mrs. F-S: Oh, I'm not meaning you. (To the Librarian) It's people like you who peddle this muck. The trouble these days is that nobody will take responsibility.

Librarian: Really, Mrs. Foulkes-Smythe?

Mrs. F-S: Are we acquainted?

Librarian: Er. . .Umm.

Mrs. F-S: Of course, I blame the parents. If they didn't spend all their time in pubs and playing bingo, they would know what obscenities were coming into their homes. No wonder there are all these abortions and all this social security. I pay, you know, through my rates and taxes, and you just buy filthy books with it. I shall complain to the (Chief) Librarian. The last twenty-five books I've borrowed from this establishment have contained the f.... word.

Librarian: Mr. Watts, shall I stamp your books?

Mrs. F-S: Don't you dare stamp that book, Sarah. I forbid you to take that filty book out of this library.

Mr. Watts: Oh, I've had enough of this! Can you ask . . .

Librarian: Oh no! What are you doing with my date stamp?

(Mr. Watt picks up the date stamp and stamps Mrs. Foulkes-Smythe on the forhead)

Heavens, it will never wash off her face!

Fig. 6: A Script, based on a given situation, and recorded on tape. The script has not been edited by the group.

- The group must have control of the editing. With a very long tape, it may be helpful to talk with the group about which parts get transcribed.

Ten minutes of tape can take up to an hour to transcribe if none of the points above have been followed.

2. Overhead projector transparency

One person in the group will need to write the script. With a transparency it is possible to use colour coding to identify each character. It is also possible to edit on the way through by wiping out what is written and writing over the top. When the transparency is displayed on the projector, all the group can see the script.

This method can work well with a large group, the tutor or a willing member of the group doing the writing.

3. Scribe

This method gives freedom from writing for all except the scribe. Most of the groups were very unfamiliar with this way of working. They are usually the ones doing the writing. It is a salutary experience to turn the tables once in a while.

The intention was for me, as the scribe, to write down what the characters were saying. Several of the groups found this very uncomfortable. They felt it would have been better if the scribe was a member of the group from the start. Other groups preferred to have an impartial scribe writing not commenting.

When the characters were talking fast, the scribe often got left behind and had to interrupt in order to clarify what had been said. Only the scribe could read back what had been written down. The script needed to be written out clearly for the rest of the group to have access.

Finalising the script

Someone commented that "you aren't you anymore" when you are in character. It is important to remember who is talking — the character or the person.

As a group begins to gain confidence and experience in writing a play, they will learn to be selective about which ideas are put into words. This is linked with knowing who you are writing for. How much information does the audience require in order to comprehend the action?

The editorial control must be with the writing group. It may need a lot of discussion to decide whether anything should be taken out or added, but never cut short this stage.

Once the final version of the play is agreed, what will happen to it?

Will the group read it to other groups?

Will the group put it onto tape for other groups?

Will the script be passed on to other groups?

Will it be read at a reading evening?

The decision is for the group.

And now . . .

Plays are great fun. I have only scratched the surface here. It is up to you to try things out and see how they work for you. Don't be put off. If you start by reading a variety of plays, people in the group will come up with ideas of their own for writing a play. All you have to do is help make it happen.

Good luck.

Useful Material

Spirals Series — Various Titles.
Published by Hutchinson
(Reviewed in the Spring/Summer 1986 edition of the ALBSU Newsletter).

Learning from Experience
Jane Mace
Published by Broadcasting Support Services, 1980
(See Section 4).

Cowboys: A play for seven voices
Published by Lee Centre
(Reviewed in ALBSU *Resources* guide).

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